

the physics of magnetism by RiverTuonen

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Summary:

Nancy and Stevie are in a relationship, but all relationships have their ghosts. Theirs is Barb's.

the physics of magnetism

Author's Note:

You don't need to read the first one to understand this.

Nancy holds a gun to her maybe-girlfriend's head on a school night in mid-November and says, "You need to go."

But Stevie doesn't go.

Or, she tries—and Nancy wouldn't blame her, if she walked away and called it all a bad dream, because her maybe-girlfriend held a gun to her face and a monster broke through the ceiling, but then the Christmas nights are flickering like the world is screaming, Jonathan is down, the bullets are gone, and she comes back. She comes *back*.

Average-heighted Stevie still dressed for the school day in her crop-top sweater and waist high jeans, her hair held away from her face with a ribbon, takes a baseball bat stuck full of nails from the floor and fights away a monster from another world without question. *One two three* . The girl who can't get a homerun wins the fight Nancy and Jonathan invited. She keeps herself in front of them until they know the threat's gone.

On a certain level, maybe that's when Nancy knows it, but she doesn't *realize* , not yet, that Stevie brought their love lives to a cul-de-sac dead end.

She doesn't realize it when the phone rings, and it's Mrs. Byers saying they found Will. Doesn't realize it when Stevie says, "I'm not letting you guys die in a fucking car accident because you won't stop shaking, Byers. Shut up and get in."

Doesn't realize it when Stevie stays the whole night in the uncomfortable hospital chair next to Nancy's dad, even though her own parents must be worried sick.

Doesn't realize it even hours later, when Mike and his friends go to

see Will, and Jonathan emerges from his brother's hospital room with the announcement that he needs a cigarette. "There's a convenience store by my house," he says as an afterthought, throwing a glance at Stevie as though remembering she was there for the first time. Nancy doesn't blame him; despite sitting less than ten feet away from the other girl, she forgot too. "You can just drop us there, if you want."

"That store's still like a twenty minute walk away," Stevie says, standing as Nancy does. Though Jonathan's shoulders are slouched with exhaustion and Nancy knows she must not be much better, Stevie has the audacity to look perfect. "Fuck that. I'm driving you home."

In the car, Jonathan asks if they can stop at the store anyway, and if they want anything. "Chocolate," Nancy says. She's jittery from the fight, unable to sit still. "Kit Kats."

"Just one of the cigarettes, thanks." Stevie taps her fingers against the dashboard, and doesn't look at Nancy beside her or in the rearview mirror to Jonathan in the backseat.

When Nancy finally realizes it, she and her maybe-girlfriend are standing next to each other outside the car because inside is stifling and Jonathan wanted a moment alone, and Nicole Livingston materializes from the early morning mist with her boyfriend Chris. She expects a comment thrown at her, if anything, because this week's been a one bullshit disaster after the next, but instead it's Stevie that the girl looks to and says, "I hear you're a dyke now, Harrington."

For a moment, Nancy doesn't know how to react, but her maybe-girlfriend says as smoothly as she says anything else, "Halfway there, Nicole."

Chris, that fucking asshole, tries to say something else, but Nancy—Nancy's too bamboozled by the realization that when Stevie came to the house demanding the chance to "make everything right" it meant she outted herself to her friends. The perfect Stevie Harrington, the Most Popular Girl in School, gave up her position in the social hierarchy and fought the Demogorgon in less than twelve hours.

Nancy laughs, hysterical. “Fuck you,” she says, proud and relieved and terrified of what this means for Stevie’s home life, and kisses her soundly.

Two people don’t through an experience like this, fighting monsters and surviving homophobic Midwestern small towns, without consequences. When the dust settles and the inevitable government confidentially papers are signed, leaving Barb missing forever instead of dead, Stevie and Nancy are too intertwined by silence to ever be with anyone but each other.

In the beginning, Stevie receives most of the school’s ridicule. It doesn’t come as a surprise, considering that her fall from social grace is nothing short of brutal, but she never lets it bother her. “They aren’t hurting me,” she answers when Nancy asks why one day a month after Will returns but Barb doesn’t and they aren’t allowed to talk about it. It’s after school, neither they nor Jonathan, who offered to help, have any reason to stay, but they can’t leave this paint to dry overnight. “What’s the saying? Sticks and stones?”

Jonathan scrubs hard at the highest area of graffiti, bright red and glaringly obvious against the dark grey metal. “People in this school are assholes,” he says, frowning. Nancy half expected their friendship to fade when she and Stevie stayed together, but they formed their own little group of three without acknowledging it. “It’s easier if you ignore it.”

When Nancy admitted she’s gay, she was fourteen and it was the summer before ninth grade. Stevie, now understandably, never touched her, but she’s spent the past couple of years facing the school’s torment (“Do you think I’m her type?” say the girls and “Can I watch?” say the boys, all lacking any sense of originality). She and Barb became friends because they were the only two open lesbians in the schools. So no, it doesn’t bother her. Not anymore.

What bothers her is that it doesn’t bother Stevie.

“They can go fuck themselves anyway,” she says too casually, throwing her ball of crumpled paper towels into the garbage. “They’d still die at track or softball without me, so they’re never going to be that bad. Sticks and stones, right?”

“Sticks and stones,” Nancy says. Sticks and stones might only break bones if they hit their mark, but there are other ways to hurt a person.

Hurting is seeing Barb’s missing posters still hung around town, now ignored, now part of the scenery. *Hurting* is speaking into a walkie-talkie to a girl who broke into dust, counting down the days. It’s watching Will fold into the memories still lurking in the back of his mind, the ones they can’t talk about. It’s realizing Stevie isn’t bothered by the thought of her parents learning she has a girlfriend because they’re never home to hear the rumors.

She and Jonathan finish cleaning the locker in fifteen minutes, chatting about music like they never hated each other. “There are concerts in Indianapolis all the time,” she says, wiping her hands on the last clean paper towel, “but I hate driving in cities.”

“I’ve never tried,” Jonathan says, frowning. “I think my mom’d kill me.”

With a laugh, Stevie says, “If it freaks me out, I’m, like, one hundred percent sure you’d have a heart attack, Byers. Hey, anything good playing at the theater this weekend?”

There’s nothing, so they make plans to rent something from Video Den and watch it at Stevie’s where no one will bother them. The wetness on the locker glimmers the school’s fluorescent lighting, and if she leads them away from Carol’s laughter by the direct parking lot entrance, Nancy and Jonathan are willing to pretend they don’t notice. She has the right to avoid her old friends and their judgement if she wants.

It takes weeks until she finally reacts, and it’s because of Nancy.

Carol, because *of course* it’s Carol, asks some bullshit question about how she managed to infect her best friend like bisexuality is disease.

Before Nancy can formulate a reply, Stevie's body goes rigid at her side and she says, "Oh, sweetheart. Are you really one to talk about infection?"

She doesn't get explicit, or threaten blackmail, but no tries to hassle Nancy again.

The first time Nancy saw Stephanie Harrington, she was in seventh grade and the girl was in eighth. Middle school grades don't mingle, and beyond a passing "oh, she's pretty," she didn't think anything of her. Then seventh grade finished, eighth grade went by, and on the first day of her freshman year of high school, Stevie walked into their fourth period, mixed-grade home economics class two minutes late.

"Who's that?" Nancy asked Barb. Outside was raining, so the school's impersonal lighting turned the room a sickly yellow, but Nancy saw Stevie through a lense of imagined sunlight.

"Sorry, Mrs. Bower," she said, slipping into a desk next Carol Smith, the Hollands' neighbor four doors down. Her hair, long and shinny and oak bark brown and pin straight, swung as she sat. Nancy, who sat diagonal from her, watched her profile without subtlety: a slightly upturned nose, wide brown eyes, her mouth done up with cherry red lipstick. Her shoulder blades stuck out when she leaned forward, elbows on the desktop. Her dress, a sailor's white and blue, was shorter than most girls ever got away with.

Barb didn't answer. Mrs. Bower, who was Mom's age with three times the amount of grey hair she never bothered to dye, only sighed. "Don't make a habit of it, Miss Harrington," she said.

"I'd never, Mrs. Bower."

Later, Nancy lay in bed staring at her ceiling, mulling over *Harrington* and *Stevie* and the little smile she gave Carol midway through class when Mrs. Bower's back was turned, her head ducked low, peeking through her eyelashes and her cheeks dented into symmetrical

dimples. By the end of a week, Nancy knew she was a goner.

“Mom, I think I’m in love,” she said as early as October that year.

“That’s nice, dear,” Mom answered, and never looked away from the string beans boiling on the stove.

“Mom, I’m pretty sure she’s straight.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

Nancy’s thoughts then don’t change now that they’re dating. Stevie is downright ethereal, a star at the center of a solar system, a black hole, the magnetic field pulling a compass needle north. All she has to do is smile, and she’ll draw the whole world in.

For Nancy, falling in love isn’t a pleasant, gradual surprise; it’s a meteor in the center of her world, throwing her sensibility axis out of alignment and scorching the grief she thought would last forever.

“I love you too,” she says when Stevie tells her for the first time. It’s May, sticky humid and hot with the air humming from early season mosquitoes, so they hide away from the heat inside the Harrington’s air conditioned kitchen with a half-pint carton of ice cream between them. Stevie’s stripped her bra and a miniskirt. Manipulative folder packets from yesterday’s college fair stretch out across the island, reminding Nancy that in a year and half, they won’t be in school together anymore.

Stevie smiles and leans across the island’s corner to kiss her. Her mouth’s cold, and tastes like dark chocolate and artificial mint. “Don’t worry,” she says. “I’ll go by here, obviously. I can pick you up every weekend. We’ll, like, so definitely fit in a dorm bed. Jonathan can take the floor if we can ever pry him away from Will long enough.”

“What if your roommate doesn’t like guests?” Nancy says, though she’s more worried that Stevie’s roommate won’t like that she has a

girlfriend. In Hawkins, as judgmental as people are, they both have a certain level of protection, because Mom's on their side and the whole school knows Stevie has the power to unmake the social hierarchy.

In college, they won't have protection. After the Demogorgon and the Upside Down, Nancy never thought anything would scare her again, but the future is terrifying.

"Then I'll just spend weekends here," she says, shrugging. "Less fun, but whatever. Besides, I actually have to accepted somewhere first."

"You'll get in," Nancy says. "Your grades are already a lot better. And you might get a sports scholarship."

Again, Stevie shrugs. "They're better, but are they *that* much better?"

They are that much better. "I'll help you with your admissions essay," Nancy says. "And I'll help you even with the classes we aren't taking together."

"I'll be happy so long as I don't fail calculus," her girlfriend says, swirling her spoon in the melting ice cream. She already has tan lines, thick pale marks on her from softball where the girls practice in their sport-bras on the sunny days.

"You won't," says Nancy, who loves her stupidly brave but not at all stupid girlfriend, and just wants her to be happy even though she also wants her to be here.

Stevie smiles, wide and dimpled. "Well," she says, "forget school for now," and slides from her stool, already reaching out to wrap her fingers in Nancy's shirt.

It's 1984, sometimes it feels like world is ending and girls like them have no future, but damn it all, she's fallen in love.

Nancy falls out of love on a Wednesday night near the end of

October. “We understand, Mrs. Holland,” she tells the mother of her best friend, the best friend who’s dead, the mother who doesn’t *know* her daughter is dead and hired a private detective who might die himself if he learns the truth.

“We’d never complain about KFC,” Stevie says, but her smile’s weak. Lately she hasn’t touched fried food or greasy food or anything microwavable, and though she picks at it now, Nancy knows it’s only for her sake. Her girlfriend’s being polite.

That’s who Stevie Harrington is, after all. Well mannered. Manufactured smiles. A *masterful* conglomeration of her father’s innate ability to fake giving a shit and mother’s avoidance issues.

She doesn’t care about these dinners, or Barb. All she cares about is pretending last year never happened, like everything’s normal.

For a moment, Nancy’s head swims and she thinks she might faint. “Excuse me,” she says, and stands. Though Stevie looks about to follow, she thankfully maintains her good manners and stays.

When she invited Nancy to her house on the day their reality disappeared, she almost refused, afraid that Queen Stevie was leading her on and it was all some cruel joke. Barb’s the one who convinced her to go. Barb said, “She really does like you,” with so much determination and sadness that Nancy felt safe.

That night, Nancy was safe. Stevie was safe. But they left Barb to go out alone, who insisted she should because she cut her hand and anyway, they needed time—and Nancy accepted that excuse even though she knew Barb liked her too, so seeing her with Stevie inevitably hurt. So she let her leave, and Stevie let her leave, which means they as good as killed her. They were *selfish*.

Barbara Holland is dead. And it’s their fault.

Nancy lies awake with that thought all night, stewing in her grief’s sharp return and the hollow gap forming as her love for solar system sun Stevie Harrington bursts and dies. The next day, she walks through school’s cold, uncaring halls with the knowledge wrapped around her heart. Every Halloween decoration drops another memory

against her spine. Every time Stevie smiles, all sweetness and never-quite-niceness, the hollow gap widens.

By the time they arrive at Whatsername's house party, the one Nancy forgot about until fifth period when Jonathan mentioned coming late or not at all, the grief's filled the gap to its seams. There are too many people, people who don't know about the world that exists in the space they never see or the monsters that live there. A freshman vomits in the host's potted palm tree as Nancy takes her third drink. Jonathan still isn't here. Though she was hoping the alcohol would dull her thoughts, she starts seeing Barb in every designated driver's nagging and even Carol's bobby-pinned hair.

"I think you've had enough, Nance." It's Stevie reaching for the cup in Nancy's hand. She smells like vanilla and cinnamon, clashing with the acid liquid Jared Lewis called fuel.

"I'm not drunk," Nancy says, because she's not. Tipsy maybe, but not drunk. The world's clear, bright. Of course Stevie doesn't care, all she cares about is her hair and her clothes; even now she's the most beautiful girl in the room, all done up in a red dress to match her lipstick. It's easy getting hoodwinked into love by someone who looks her.

Nancy moves away, trying to escape, but Stevie's faster, and her hand closes around the plastic cup. "Yes, you are," she starts, but Nancy pulls, and suddenly the red liquid soaks right through her favorite white dress. This is bullshit, she thinks. This party is bullshit, I'm bullshit, Stevie's bullshit. It's all just bullshit.

"Oh my *god*," she says, snappish, and stalks towards the bathroom. Her heel wobbles. Inside is bright white, a morgue white, and Stevie's behind her, not *shutting up*, and—

In the morning, Jonathan explains he brought her home because she sent her girlfriend out of the party almost in tears. "If you really meant it, you have to tell her," he says, as though Jonathan Byers is in the position to give anyone relationship advice. "It's not fair to either of you."

Nancy sinks low in the car seat. When he appeared at her door rather

than Stevie to bring her to school, she was so surprised it took five minutes before she asked why. "I'm such an asshole," she says as they reach the parking lot. The tree outside the cafeteria entrance lost its final leaves last night, leaving its shaking branches bare.

"Yeah," he says. "You are." As he circles the line of cars, he adds, "Did you mean it?"

Yesterday she did. Today she might, or maybe not. They pass Stevie's car and pull out of the lot again to park on the side street. Nancy might love her, she might not, but she knows she never had romantic feelings for Barb. Maybe she's a little guilty for that too.

Frustrated, she asks, "Why are you so invested anyway?"

As they exit, he answers, "You're my friends," without meeting her eye. Nancy's too exhausted from a drunken sleep and hangover to argue, so she lets it lie for now.

She'll get Barb the justice she deserves, she thinks. Then she can sort out what she feels for Stevie, because it isn't fair any other way.

When the lawyer in his three piece suit came from the Department of Energy with all his paperwork demanding Nancy vow her silence, she raged. "My best friend died," she said. "She's *dead*. Don't you get that? Do any of you give a shit that you got people killed?"

They didn't care, so Nancy signed the papers with everyone else and spent a year seeing Barb's face on missing posters and televised Amber Alerts. Years from now, when she's old and dying, she won't forgive herself for waiting a year, but now she's ready. Those papers proved those bastards' worst fear is their secrets revealed, so Nancy will see Barb's story is told. She deserved a whole life, but Nancy can give her a funeral and revenge, at least.

Though bringing Stevie is out of the question, Jonathan will follow her anywhere. She knows that with a cold sort of certainty she's willing to exploit. "We need to do this," she says. "Will came back.

Barb didn't."

With no one else to tell, they concoct a plan to drive to the Hollands' private investigator, who's also a journalist. "I want to see that place burned to the ground," she says. "For Barb, for Will. For all of us."

Jonathan looks at her blankly and doesn't answer before turning on the car.

Neither of them expect the journalist to be how he is, and how he sets them on edge. He drinks too much and he's intense, but he's smart. "This is wild," he says. The off-white lighting of his basement contorts shadows across his face like a Halloween mask, a parody of himself. "Still. Not the strangest shit I've heard." He says no one else will believe it. He says he'll have to water down the truth, and feeds them vodka, though he knows they're both underage.

It burns, cheap and bitter, but Nancy swallows it down. Barb's going to get what she deserves, a funeral and acknowledgment. Now it's time to head home; Jonathan needs to make breakfast in the morning, and she needs to save her love life.

Then: "You can take the spare bed."

Nancy and Jonathan freeze in synchronized discomfort. After a moment, he clears his throat and says, "It's fine. I'll take the couch."

"Wait," the journalist says with a laugh. His pupils are dilated from liquor. "You're telling me you aren't together?"

"No," Jonathan answers as she bluntly says, "He's not my type." Though Stevie assumed they slept together last year, Nancy solidly likes girls. She accepted her girlfriend's confusion after they settled; it's not as though she ever had anyone to explain sexuality to her before then.

The Hollands' last hope blinks. "Well, I see someone doesn't believe in tact. Suit yourselves."

In the end, they sleep curled together on the spare bed. Sometimes bad dreams are easier to face with another person there.

Nancy doesn't save her love life. Instead, she and Jonathan return to Hawkins to find that while they were busy securing her best friend's vengeance, the monster that killed her came back.

Though she wants to scream, cry, she compartmentalizes and plays the Velma to Jonathan's Freddie, following the new clues to the the lab. The place where all this began god knows how long ago. At the middle of it are their brothers' friends, sans their brothers themselves, and her girlfriend. She's even more inappropriately dressed than last year in a dress and a denim jacket torn at the sleeve.

There's a lot Nancy should be asking, but all the slips out is "Stevie?"

"Nancy?"

After, things grow fuzzy around edges—Mike and the Byers inside with the Chief, probably, Will cadaverous in the backseat, Joyce repeating "but he's dead, he's dead, he's dead," until they finally reach the house. Her anger's suffocating. Will, so desperate for cold and near dying already, might die from the heat of it.

Through it all, Stevie still manages to spare a moment to look from Nancy to Jonathan and quickly away. *Fuck fuck fuck.*

When they're finally alone, they're outside in the cold October night picking through supplies that might save Will. Stevie, tone light, says, "I'm a shitty girlfriend, but hey. Guess I found my calling as an eighth grade teacher. Turns out I'm a damn good babysitter."

"Stevie—" She shouldn't be the one comforting Nancy, not when all she did was take the razor edge of Nancy's worldly anger.

But she smiles, all red lipstick and sunlight. "It's okay," she says, then says it again.

It's not okay, not okay by miles, but reality's flipped again. There are bigger concerns than Nancy's love life, so they can fix it later, she tells herself—except that later comes, and she finds she once again

walked herself right into a shitshow.

Will's alive, awake, and free of possession, and Hopper just radioed in on the walkie-talkie to say El saved them and survived, but they aren't all safe. A full fifteen minutes ago, or maybe longer, the kids called in screaming that help, help, they're in the field with the tunnels and please help, Stevie can't move. A girl said something about a step-brother. How they connect, Nancy didn't know, but she expected a broken ankle or a bite from one of those creatures. What she doesn't expect is the injuries of an ordinary beating.

Stevie's conscious, but not aware of her surroundings. Dew soaks through her dress and blood soaks her hair and skin. No one bothers to check her eyes for dilation or her body for the extent of damage before Joyce says, "Nancy, get her to the hospital in her car. I need to get Will home. Are her parents around?"

"No," Jonathan says as all the kids but Mike insist they can't leave Stevie and Nancy focuses on reminding herself to breathe, that she won't do her girlfriend any good if she hyperventilates. "I don't even think they're in the country."

"Keys," Nancy says, swallowing hard. Stevie's eyes shine in the headlights' glow, and her face is pale. Nighttime darkness warps her coloring, turning her hair black. A monochromatic shading that makes her lipstick pop the same red as all that blood. "Who has her keys? Someone? Keys?"

"They're right here." Mike snatches them up from the car floor. There's blood on his hands, but he doesn't seem injured. Dustin and Lucas have blood on their shirts and jackets. The girl, who supports Stevie's head in her lap, has blood on her legs.

That's too much blood. The darkness hides the source until Jonathan steps into the gaggle of kids and rolls her into his arms. It's on her temple. More spills from the corner of her mouth.

Even as Nancy starts the car, she's shaking so badly she's afraid she won't be able to drive. The kids pile in, the girl and Dustin the backseat with a towel from Joyce's truck, and Lucas in the front with a map and flashlight he produced seemingly from nowhere. Good.

Nancy never memorized the directions to the hospital. She never needed them. The few times she went to see Will, Jonathan or Stevie always drove.

“Don’t crash,” Jonathan says, successfully not calming her, and slams the door.

She snaps at Lucas for faster directions, for the two in the back to keep Stevie awake, and nearly dies hitting a telephone pole when she pulls into a spot in the ER of the hospital Will spent two weeks in less than a year ago. “Wait here,” she tells the kids, and runs.

Stevie walks away from That Night from with a concussion, a fractured rib, multiple contusions, and a sudden inability to act comfortable around anyone above the age of fourteen.

A month passes, then two, and the injuries are healed but she stays in a constant state of wind up toy tight. Even Mom comments. “I mean, I really appreciate that she’s willing to take Mike next weekend,” she says on a Tuesday night in mid-December, chopping carrots for stew as outside the snow pours down faster than rain, “but should I ask Jonathan? Do you think she can handle it?”

Next weekend Mom and Nancy are driving to Notre Dame for an overnight visitation, and convinced Dad to come. Joyce is working a late shift; Mom doesn’t trust boys to babysit as well as girls, as though Mike isn’t old enough to stay by himself for a couple of nights. Sighing, Nancy says, “Stevie can handle it, Mom. And it’s not like Mike’s going to be a dick to her.”

“Language, Nancy.”

“ Mom. ”

Mom shakes her head, dumps the carrots in the pot, and moves on to the zucchini. “If you’re going to stand around,” she says, “at least make yourself useful and cut the broccoli.” After a short silence, she adds, “I only mean that Stevie seems a little...spacey. And I doubt her

parents are around.”

Even before *That Night*, Mom let Stevie stay over most weekends because “no young lady should be in a house alone.” Nancy starts on the broccoli, chopping at a slower pace than her mother. Cold seeps through the window glass in tendrils, cutting through the central heating’s sputtering warmth. Suddenly, her fuzzy Christmas sweater isn’t enough.

“Why do you think she’s spacey?” she asks cautiously.

There’s another pause before Mom says, “I do notice *some* things, you know. Stevie isn’t exactly a chatterbox anymore.”

On Friday afternoon, when the roads are slick with ice but the snow stopped, they drop Mike at Stevie’s. “We’ll call you with contact information when we get there,” Nancy says as her brother darts past Stevie to the living room. Somehow, she became a babysitter in the last few weeks, and her house one of the few places in town where El’s allowed to go. More than likely, at least a few of the kids are there already. “You know. In case the world ends.”

Stevie casts a look over her shoulder. Though her injuries are healed, the scar on her temple is still painfully noticeable. “Okay,” she answers, and then, almost as an afterthought, says, “Have fun.”

“Can we order pizza?” Dustin calls from the kitchen, as though she isn’t the best cook out of all them. She ignores him.

“Hey,” Nancy says, tucking her mittened hands in her pockets. “Are you okay to take him for the weekend?”

“What?” Her girlfriend turns back, blinking her big eyes owlishly. She hadn’t bothered to throw on a sweater before answering the door. “Yeah, Mike’s good. They’re good. I’ll make sure he isn’t up that late.”

“No, that’s not what I—” With a sigh that blows out a puff of condensation, Nancy stops. “I’ll call you,” she says again. “Don’t let them get too bratty.”

They kiss before she leaves, a kiss that she initiates because Stevie

doesn't initiate much anymore. Mom's right. She doesn't talk as much, either. If Nancy's honest with herself, getting her girlfriend to smile is also harder. Like the rest of them, she shakes if the lights flicker and can't sleep in the dark, but now she also flinches at raised voices and steps between whoever she's with and any perceived half threat.

After everything they've been through, it's unfair that Billy fucking Hargrove is the real reason her relationship is held together with duct tape and superglue.

During the weekend, she calls twice. Mike picks up the first time, Dustin the second. "What if I *wasn't* the one calling?" she asks after Dustin passes Stevie the phone. It's snowing again. She's letting Stevie know they're going to be late returning.

"Besides you or Jonathan or a parent," she says in a tone like a vocalized shrug as Max and Dustin argue intelligibly in the background, "who else would?"

Sadly, she's right. For two weeks, her parents made an effort to be halfway decent, but that ended almost as quickly as it started. Nancy pinches the bridge of her nose. "We're going to head out now," she says. "I love you."

When Stevie says, "I love you too," it sounds reflexive, distracted, followed by a goodbye and "Fucking hell, guys, just accept that Max is right—"

The call ends, leaving Nancy with a dial tone and the background static of the hotel room TV. Outside the snow falls in lazy drifts, inside the heat is suffocating, and all she wants is for everyone to be happy and safe.